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Residential recycling study: Eastern Iowa communities do well but residents still throwing recyclables in the garbage

Cedar Rapids, IA — To find out how much eastern Iowans are recycling, a local planning agency used the most reliable method there is—they sorted through residents' garbage.

During 2002, solid waste planners at the East Central Iowa Council of Governments (ECICOG) and their environmental consultants sorted out materials that could have been recycled from thousands of pounds of residential garbage. The waste was collected from households in Cedar Rapids, Marion, Iowa City, Monticello, Belle Plaine, Traer, rural Iowa County, and Central City. These communities represent various approaches to residential recycling – from weekly curbside collection to drop-off only.

The exercise was one of several components of a recycling evaluation study conducted in six counties that comprise the ECICOG solid waste planning area. The study was funded by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources with fees generated by Iowa landfills.

Here is what ECICOG found.



Sorting waste in Monticello: Researchers pull out recyclables from residential garbage. Compared to other U.S. cities, eastern Iowa communities perform well, but residents could do better.

Pay-as-you-throw programs work best, but not all are equal

Several of the case study communities have forms of what are called “pay-as-you-throw” or “unit based pricing” waste management programs. For their monthly fee, Cedar Rapidsians can set out one garbage container; subsequent containers must have a tag. Iowa City residents are allowed two containers while Monticello residents must pay for every container of garbage they put out. In all of the communities, no limit is placed on the number of recycling bins households can set out.

Can you guess which community had the fewest recyclables in their garbage?

Annually, Monticello households leave about 190 pounds of recyclables in their garbage compared to 230 and 300 pounds respectively in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. In Belle Plaine, where residents must take recyclables to a drop-off, single-family households leave around 330 pounds of recyclable paper and containers in the garbage. Pounds per household are even higher in multi-family households.

“Multiply households and pounds and you end up with thousands of tons of paper, soup cans, and detergent bottles that are needlessly being buried in our local landfills,” says Marie DeVries, an ECICOG solid waste planner. “Compared to households in other states, we do pretty well, but the fact is, we can do better.”

Other factors that increase recycling

In addition to paying for every container of garbage (no “free” bags—all costs are placed on garbage), other factors that increase recycling include:

- ❑ Parallel systems—Garbage and recyclables are collected curbside on the same day every week.
- ❑ Co-mingled materials – Residents place all recyclables in the same bin rather than separating paper from plastic from metal.
- ❑ Landfill bans—Several communities in the study are subject to a cardboard ban, and this serves to reduce the amount of recyclables in the garbage.
- ❑ Higher levels of education spending per household.



Recycling tonnages are down in Cedar Rapids, but participation in curbside recycling is high. The explanation could be the economic slowdown.

Benton County uses findings

Benton County is already using study findings to help guide their efforts to change recycling programs in the county's 14 communities. For the past decade, the county has relied on drop-offs, but some officials no longer believe these are adequately serving residents' needs. “The Board of Supervisors has encouraged communities to implement curbside recycling—they’re

concerned about filling up the landfill with material that doesn't have to be there," says Jennifer Ryan, another ECICOG solid waste planner.



Benton County residents who want to recycle take material to drop-off sites in each community. Many communities are implementing residential curbside programs in FY04.

Participation high but recycling tonnages down

In communities with curbside recycling, participation is high, especially compared to other parts of the nation. Participation exceeds 90 percent in some neighborhoods with average participation for all routes more than 70 percent. But, communities report that total recycling tonnages are down the past two years.

"We can only speculate why recycling is down and garbage tonnage is maintaining or going up," says DeVries. "The economy is always a factor. Packaging is a large portion of recyclables—so the less people buy, the fewer recyclables are generated. It's a bit of a dichotomy because it looks like a bad thing.

"But what we may have now is waste *reduction*, which is actually further up on the hierarchy of waste management than recycling."

What motivates us to recycle?

To get a handle on why people do or do not recycle, focus groups were held during the yearlong study. More than 200 eastern Iowa residents – in groups of 9-20—were asked questions about their recycling and waste management behavior.

Among the findings:

- ❑ Program awareness. Residents don't always know about local programs especially in communities that have drop-offs only. Education and promotional materials are either not reaching these folks or the message is not getting their attention.
- ❑ Program confidence. Residents not confident in what can and can't be recycled would rather toss an item in the garbage than make a mistake.
- ❑ Environmental relevancy. Residents who recycle believe "it makes a difference;" conversely, people who don't believe that recycling has much of an impact on the environment, don't recycle or don't recycle much.
- ❑ Convenience. Residents appreciate how easy recycling has become in some of the programs. There was a high degree of satisfaction with programs that require little or no separation of materials and weekly curbside pickup.



Iowa City residents discuss recycling with researchers in a study conducted by the East Central Iowa Council of Governments, a local government planning organization.

What about the costs?

The study also reviewed costs. As expected, communities that provide curbside recycling and education materials capture the most recyclable material, but also have the highest per household cost. Drop-off programs are less costly, but capture far less material. For example, in Belle Plaine—a Benton County community served by a drop-off – approximately 200 pounds per household are recycled annually compared to 500 pounds in Marion, which has curbside.

“Cities have to decide what’s more important — diverting material from landfills or keeping short term costs down,” says DeVries. For the past decade, recycling programs have enjoyed huge public support, and the study indicates that participation continues to be high.

What’s next?

Promoting recycling among residents will continue, but ECICOG and the cities and counties it serves know the net has to be widened.

Because local governments have the most control over residential programs, the focus has been on this sector. “Single family residential is the proverbial low-hanging fruit,” says DeVries. “For the most part, local governments have dabbled in multi-family and commercial recycling. These sectors are much more difficult to address.”

Addressing multi-family and commercial recycling is especially important in Linn and Johnson Counties because these sectors generate 70-80 percent of waste going to their landfills.

“We are emphasizing programs like the Iowa Waste Exchange and events such as the annual (Linn County) Business Recycling Challenge—both aimed at increasing commercial waste reduction and recycling,” says DeVries.

For more information about the study, contact Marie DeVries, (319) 365-9941, ext. 26 or mdecicog@inav.net

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